

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

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INTRODUCTION

During the last fifteen years there has emerged in sociology and social psychology a distinct approach called social exchange theory. Four figures were largely responsible: George Homans, John Thibaut, Harold Kelley, and Peter Blau. Homans in "Social behavior as exchange" (1958) made a conscious effort to identify and advance this point of view. In 1961, he amplified his argument in *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, which has now been revised (1974). Also in the late 1950s Thibaut & Kelley were constructing their compact conceptual scheme in *The Social Psychology of Groups* (1959). While different in important ways, their work converged with Homans's, strengthening the general exchange approach. When Blau's *Exchange and Power* (1964a) appeared, the exchange approach was assured a future in the field.

The differences between these three major works were as important in launching the exchange approach as were their similarities. While Blau gave more emphasis to technical economic analysis, Homans dwelled more upon the psychology of instrumental behavior. Yet in doing so, he drew upon a different brand of psychology than that represented by Thibaut & Kelley. In addition, they employed different strategies of theory construction. Thibaut & Kelley start with psychological concepts, build upward to the dyad, and build upward from there to the small group. Homans takes a more reductionist approach, moving in the opposite direction. With considerable knowledge of group-level processes already in mind, he points to the psychological principles of reinforcement which, he claims, help to explain them. However, Peter Blau, contrary to both of these approaches, warns us that preoccupation with psychology can blind us to the important emergent aspects of social exchange.

When three strong statements such as these diverge on particulars, yet converge on a central viewpoint—social exchange as a frame of reference—that viewpoint will be given greater impetus. Now, seventeen years later, exchange theory is still growing; it still contains diversity and sparks of controversy.

The Scope of Exchange Theory

In setting the goals for this critique of social exchange theory, we must understand that it is not a theory at all. It is a frame of reference within which many theories—some micro and some more macro—can speak to one another, whether in argument or in mutual support. The scope condition for the exchange frame of reference has been most simply defined by Blau (1964a): "Social exchange as here conceived is limited to actions that are contingent on rewarding reactions from others." Implied is a two-sided, mutually contingent, and mutually rewarding process involving "transactions" or simply "exchange."

That basic principles of reinforcement psychology and microeconomics might be relevant in studying social exchange (Homans 1961) is self-evident. Indeed, the exchange approach in sociology might be described, for simplicity, as the economic analysis of noneconomic social situations. The social situations addressed by Homans, Thibaut & Kelley, and Blau were located largely in the informal social interaction of small groups. Exchange theory brings a quasi-economic mode of analysis into those situations. Can group pressure (Schachter 1951) and member conformity (Hockbaum 1954) be better viewed as two sides of a transaction involving the exchange of utility or reward? (See Homans 1961, Emerson 1964, Nord 1968). Can status in a peer-group situation be examined through supply curves and the law of diminishing returns (Blau 1964)? Should eye contact with a smile, which evokes valued approval be studied as one transaction in an exchange relation?

The convergence among Homans, Thibaut & Kelley, and Blau can be said to converge in turn with other important work. At the micro level, the study of strategic interaction has strong affinities with an exchange approach. Do we gain anything by treating identity and presentations of self in social interaction as commodities of a sort, subject to gain or loss through implicit bargaining? Perhaps the line of research represented by Weinstein & Deutschberger (1964), Jones (1964), Gergen (1969), Weinstein (1966), Weinstein et al (1968, 1969), Stires & Jones (1969), and Goffman (1970) will converge with the operant psychology of Homans and others. Clearly, operant psychology is not the only starting point for the study of exchange. Barth (1966), in developing an explicit exchange framework in anthropology draws upon this line of work.

Further promising convergence between exchange theory and role theory can be found in the work of Goode (1973), research by Emerson (1968) and Stolte & Emerson (1976).

At the macrosociological level, exchange has been employed in the analysis of social stratification and the division of labor (Emerson 1972b), in the study of interorganizational relations (Levine & White 1961, Cook 1975b) and urban community structure and decision making (Clark 1968). In some discussions exchange theory has been treated as a general theory parallel to structural functionalism (Clark 1972, Ellis 1971). In political science (Curry & Wade 1968), the exchange approach has been offered as a general approach to political behavior.

One line of convergence, in my judgment, is especially important. As Anderson (1970, personal communication) has observed, "sociological exchange theory shades into economic anthropology in a rather imperceptible way." Ever since anthropologists began to focus attention on primitive economics they have been engaged in continuous debate about the proper place of economic theory in anthropological research—from Herskovits (1940) to Schneider (1974). Stated briefly, neoclassical economic theory is organized so heavily around rational individual decision making in a perfectly competitive market that its applicability to tradition-bound or normatively regulated behavior outside of competitive markets is placed in doubt, yet goods are produced and distributed through exchange. Therefore, social exchange theory is needed to deal with exchange behavior in non-Western economies (Herskovits 1940, Malinowski 1922, Levi-Strauss 1969, Polanyi et al 1957, Sahlins 1965) and also in Western society outside of the perfectly competitive market. [This convergence has been examined recently in an unfortunately doctrinaire manner by Ekeh (1974).]

Perhaps I cast too broad a net. I include within exchange theory items as diverse as Burgess & Neilsen's (1974) laboratory study of reciprocal operant reinforcement in the dyad and Polanyi's studies of "reciprocity, redistribution and exchange" in comparative economic anthropology (Polanyi et al 1958:243-70). However, if I err it is more on the side of omission; for while the material is extremely heterogeneous in morphological detail, it is joined by analytic concepts—resource, reward, reinforcement, cost, utility, opportunity, profit, outcome, transaction, payoff, etc.

These concepts, drawn from different fields and fashioned for use in different contexts, carry the promise of greater potential parsimony than their large number might imply.

Plan of this Critique

In this paper I first examine what I think are the central concepts and some of the main research topics within the exchange frame of reference. Special attention is given to major controversies that spring from those concepts: rationality, tautology, and reductionism. I turn then to economic anthropology, where the same generic controversies are seen in the interplay between economic theory and economic anthropology. Those parallel debates are used to suggest a partial resolution: explicit adoption of the social relation rather than either persons or actions, as the unit of analysis. Springing from the relation as the unit of analysis, major differences are observed between economic and social exchange theory.

Finally, attention is focused on the peculiarly dyadic character of most exchange analysis. The transition from micro or dyadic to macro exchange theory is taken up as the final topic of interest in the paper.

CONCEPTS AND CONTROVERSIES

Homans (1969) has argued that behavioral psychology contains the most general laws applicable to human social behavior. Since society, as he sees it, consists of

behaving people, he suggests that social theory can be advanced beyond its currently impoverished condition if principles of reinforcement are included in sociological explanations. Thus, Homans issued a clarion call for a behavioral psychological form of exchange theory in sociology, which has provoked in reaction charges of reductionism, assumed rationality, and tautological reasoning. It is essential, therefore, that we begin with an examination of some of the psychological underpinnings of social exchange theory, in order to confront these important controversies. In my opinion the charges of rationality, tautology, and reductionism have real substance and warrant careful attention by exchange theorists. It is interesting that similar issues have emerged in economic anthropology concerning the use of economic theory in the study of primitive exchange.

The Operant Format

The variety of reinforcement psychology chosen by Homans was Skinnerian operant psychology. That school has two outstanding features. First, it is characterized by its own methodology, which evolved around the well-known Skinner box. Second, it has assembled a large body of empirical regularities obtained through that method, with a minimum—if not an absolute paucity—of theoretical interpretation.

The operant research format typically involves (a) a single subject, (b) studied over an extended period of time, (c) in a bounded environment that allows sequential manipulation of stimulus conditions. That environment might be a nursery, a school for retarded children, a hospital for a patient, the Skinner box for a pigeon, or some other total institution. Thus, in the typical operant format, (d) the experimenter (or "behavior modifier") enjoys real social power over the subject. Therefore, as we shall see, operant psychology is the study of the effective use of social power in controlling behavior.

For a social exchange theorist, operant research is seen to study an organism-environment exchange system. Let us illustrate, as Homans did, with the pigeon in the Skinner box. Let the box contain a light (S_1) that is either on or off and a disc that the pigeon might occasionally peck (R). In addition, the box will occasionally provide some stimulus we shall simply label S_2 for now. Suppose the box is so designed that: (a) if the light is on and (b) if the disc is pecked five times, then S_2 will occur; after which another five presses will make S_2 recur; and so on for a long time. Now suppose that pigeons are so designed that: (c) if the pigeon has not encountered S_2 very often recently and (d) if disc pecking produces S_2 , then the pigeon will peck the disc. Under these conditions an *exchange relation* will form between the pigeon and its environment (the Skinner box in this case). The pigeon will give out pecking behavior R contingent upon S_2 and the box will provide S_2 contingent upon R . The contingency is the one referred to by Blau above, in his definition of exchange.

The next point bears heavily upon the logical structure of social exchange theory as put forth by Homans. The observed fact of disc-pecking under the above contingencies is the defining condition wherein: S_1 is labeled a *discriminative stimulus*, or S^D , R is labeled an *operant response*, and S_2 is called a *reinforcing stimulus*, or S^R . These three basic concepts are defined in terms of their relation to one another,

and they constitute three analytical elements in a single empirical system—an exchange relation. We shall return to this point below when we discuss and attempt to resolve the question of tautologies in social exchange theory.

The organism-environment exchange involved here can be seen clearly in the ratio R/S_2 in contingency (b) above. That contingency is called a *schedule of reinforcement*, a fixed ratio schedule of 5/1 in this case, called simply an FR-5 schedule. If S_2 is one unit of grain, then FR-5 can be taken as the price the pigeon must pay in disc pecks in exchange for grain. Operant research has dwelt largely upon the efficacy of various schedules of reinforcement in obtaining favorable exchange for the experimenter (the environment in our example). We learn that an FR-1 is most effective in drawing the pigeon into an exchange relation (thus making him dependent and gaining power over him). Once he has entered the relation we are told how to “thin out” the schedule to FR-2, FR-3 . . . FR-347, gaining more and more behavior at less and less cost (in grain) to the experimenter. We are told, by operant research, that if we shift from a fixed to a variable ratio (VR-X), then extinction is slow. That is, we can continue to get behavior from the pigeon after we have terminated our side of the exchange.

Is it any wonder, then, that the two most prominent research topics in social exchange theory are power and justice? Can there be any more important topics for study in sociology?

Homans' Propositions

While pigeons are not very interesting to sociologists, Homans reminds us that the system outlined above applies as well to people. He summarizes (1974) the system described in the contingencies (a) . . . (d) above in three basic propositions about human behavior:

1. *The Success Proposition*. “For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action” (under similar stimulus conditions)” (p. 16).
2. *The Stimulus Proposition*. “If in the past the occurrence of a particular stimulus, or set of stimuli, has been the occasion on which a person's action has been rewarded, then the more similar the present stimuli are to the past ones, the more likely the person is to perform the action, or some similar action, now” (pp. 22–23).
3. *The Deprivation-Satiation Proposition*. “The more often in the recent past a person has received a particular reward, the less valuable any further unit of that reward becomes for him” (p. 29).

The reader should notice that these three propositions correspond with three of the elements above (contingencies (d), (a), and (c), respectively) that jointly define the basic concept of reinforcement. Since to reward means to reinforce, it follows that proposition 1 cannot be falsified. It is a noncontingent proposition. (See below on the issue of tautology.)

Homans supplements these three propositions with others, two of which should be introduced now. He observes that rewards occur in varying magnitude and

accordingly he defines *value* as "the degree of reward." (1974:25) He then states two propositions which I take to be refinements of proposition 1. They are:

4. *The Value Proposition*. "The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action." (p. 25)
- The Rationality Proposition*. "In choosing between alternative actions, a person will choose that one for which, as perceived by him at the time, the value, V , of the result, multiplied by the probability, p , of getting the result, is the greater." (p. 43)

The Issue of Rationality: Operant Psychology Versus Decision Theory

The reader will appreciate the fact that the terms reward, reinforcement, value, and utility have very nearly the same meaning in this discussion. Reward and value in Homans's usage are equivalent to reinforcement and the magnitude thereof in operant language. In economics and decision theory (Harsanyi 1966 and others) utility, U , is employed where Homans uses V in the Rationality Proposition. The element p is a subjective probability estimate or "expectation" in decision theory, and it corresponds with the frequency of reward in proposition 1. Add to all of this the fact that the well-known and important principle of diminishing marginal utility in economic theory expresses the same idea as the deprivation-satiation proposition, and it becomes very clear that operant psychology and economic decision theory offer alternative starting points for social exchange theory. In my opinion it makes very little difference which of these traditions one chooses, but there are some differences we should be aware of.

The first of these is the troublesome problem of *rationality* in human social interaction. In one place Blau defined exchange behavior to mean "voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring—" (1964a:91) These words, along with the rationality proposition above, seem to describe people making conscious choices based upon self-interested deliberation prior to taking action. Bierstedt (1965), in his review of Blau's book, simply doubts that much of human social action is based upon such considerations. I am inclined to agree with him. Furthermore, while people and firms sometimes act with such deliberate rationality, I do not want to limit social exchange theory to that narrow class of actions. Indeed, a wide range of behavior studied within exchange theory—gift giving, relations of reciprocity, and the norm of reciprocity (Mauss 1925, Sahlins 1965, Gouldner 1960)—is explicitly not "motivated by the returns they are expected to bring," as Blau puts it.

Yet we have the paradox that such behavior usually *does* bring returns. The recipient of a gift is somehow obligated to provide a return (Gouldner 1960), even though it is unseemly for the giver to expect one. On this topic reinforcement psychology and economic decision theory differ markedly. It is generally understood or assumed in economic theory that an intelligent and well-informed actor formulates probabilities and estimates expected utilities for alternative actions prior to deciding and acting. "Rationality" in human behavior can refer to these predecision cognitive processes, together with the decision rule stated in the rationality proposi-

tion. By contrast, any reader who feels that people, in their social relations with each other, act more on sentiment and habit than upon such reasoned decision making should find Homans and operant psychology much more palatable. The operant approach to social exchange allows, but does not require, such rationality. In place of calculation and reason in human affairs, it relies upon value as the result of prior conditioning in longitudinal exchange relationships. A gift given to a friend without expectations of return can fail to recur over time when it is not reciprocated. The friendship might die or fail to form in a process of reinforcement that entails no rational element at all. The issue, then, is not the prior calculation of the giver—it is the unfolding future of the relation. Gifts and party invitations are not always reciprocated, in which case they don't get repeated.

The above interpretation is a straightforward application of the basic operant format. I am led to reject prior calculation of returns as a defining feature of exchange in favor of a much broader base—social operant behavior.¹ The latter includes, but is not confined to, the former. Social operant behavior is behavior whose level or frequency of performance over time is sustained by reinforcing (rewarding) activity from other people. If the emotion and accompanying behavior called “love,” with all of its irrational self-denial in pursuit of the other's welfare, is sustained in the long run only by reciprocal love (among other supporting returns), then the love relation is appropriately analyzed within the exchange approach.

I believe this position is essentially what Homans outlined. On the issue of prior planning and deliberate choice people are sometimes more like pigeons than like entrepreneurs, but entrepreneurs are people. Thus, rationality in the sense of action based upon prior calculation of expected returns forms one part of a larger subject matter of social exchange.

The Issue of Tautology

Both pigeons and people might be considered “rational” in a less cerebral sense, meaning only that they tend to act so as to maximize reward and minimize cost over time or in the long run. Here also the operant-based approach of Homans differs markedly from the economic or decision theory approach. Homans's propositions I and III agree with decision theory in asserting reward or utility maximization over the long run, but they assign a different logical status to this assertion.

For economists and decision theorists, rationality is either offered as an assumption, for very good theoretical reasons, or it is offered as a normative model for “appropriate” behavior. By contrast, Homans seems to offer his version—propositions I and III—as empirical truths demonstrated in the Skinnerian laboratory.

¹In stating my preference for reciprocal operant behavior rather than maximizing decisions as a scope condition, I in no way advocate or adopt “Skinnerian” psychology or any other behaviorist position. The word social *operant* is used here simply as a short and well-understood way of saying behavior that is formed and sustained or changed over time or through repeated occasions, in a way that is contingent upon valued returns (reinforcement) from other people.

Unfortunately, neither Skinner nor anyone else has or will prove them through empirical research, for they are both untestable. As a result, (a) Homans's scheme has often been challenged on grounds of tautology, and (b) with propositions I and III removed we are left wondering what contribution operant psychology really does make to social exchange theory. (See Emerson 1972a for a laborious effort to answer this question.)

However, the above assertions must be explained. Homans has taken great care to defend his scheme against charges of tautology, both in 1961 and 1974, yet the charges persist. Why? And does it really matter?

The problem lies at the heart of exchange theory, with the most important concepts of all: reward and value. Homans feels that the success proposition (1) is safe from this challenge because response frequency and reinforcement (reward) frequency can be independently measured (1974:33–34). They can be, but that is not the point. They do not have independent meaning: a reward is, by definition, a stimulus consequence that increases or maintains response frequency. Therefore, proposition 1 cannot be wrong. It cannot be tested. All we can do is use it; use it in logical chains; use it to determine what is and is not a rewarding stimulus. If the pigeon in the Skinner box did not peck the disk when the disk-peck produced food, the pigeon might die, but proposition I would live on in good health. It is a logically useful but untestable formulation. As Walkins (1970:172–79) has so elegantly shown, we, as social scientists, cannot logically organize our work without some proposition linking value to action.

Thus, if we need proposition 1 or something like it, does it matter whether its truth depends on fact or upon definition? If we are not clear about which form of truth to assign to it, then our thinking gets muddled. For example, we might design experiments intending to "test" a proposition that is true by definition. Crosbie (1972) conducted such an experiment. Noting that "few, if any, attempts have been made to directly test Homans' original propositions," Crosbie set out to test the equivalent of Propositions 1, 3, and 4 above. He conducted an experiment in which subjects could either comply with requests or not comply when rewarded for complying. "The reward selected was Tandem notebooks—. It was felt that these would have an initial reward value to the student subjects."

Thus, with notebooks assumed to be rewarding, the experiment purported to test certain general hypotheses. It was found that subjects comply more when given notebooks than when not given anything (the success proposition); subjects comply more for two than for one notebook (the value proposition); and the increment of increased compliance goes down with additional notebooks accumulated (the deprivation-satiation proposition). But suppose the results had been different: I submit that if subjects had not complied in the above pattern the initial assumption—that notebooks were rewarding—would have been rejected. Suppose further that the experimenter had some other independent evidence that notebooks were rewarding to those subjects, yet failed to get compliance in exchange for notebooks. Would we then be forced to reject Propositions I and III as false? No, we would then conclude that the value of noncompliance is greater than the value of notebooks to those

subjects. In fact, Propositions I and III are not at issue in this experiment. They are true. They are useful, not testable.

The utility of such propositions in the logic of explanation is well discussed by Walkins (1970). That there are uses (as well as misuses) for tautologies is shown by Liska (1969). Their value in experimental research can be illustrated with a study that was organized on a logical structure very different from the above experiment. Cozby (1972) set out to discover whether or not intimate revelations are valuable to receive and costly to give, by observing the reciprocation of intimacy in the social exchange process.

The Issue of "Explanation" Versus Prediction

But the issue of tautology has other facets to it. The fact that Homans's propositions I and III are not testable implies only that they should be employed as assumptions rather than as empirical contributions from operant psychology. It does not imply that Homans's current use of those propositions is circular or tautological. As Meeker (1971:486) has observed,

... rationality can easily become tautological; if we predict that people choose what they value and find out what they value by observing what they choose, we have not accomplished much except to describe choice behavior.

In formulating his propositions, Homans was fully cognizant of the danger described by Meeker and he devoted several pages to discussing it (1961:42-43, 1974:33-35). If one has independent knowledge of what a person finds rewarding, then propositions 1 or 3 can be employed in explaining or predicting a person's behavior. Some examples will help:

1. Why does group member A "conform" to group norms?
 - (a) Proposition 3 (assumed):
 - (b) member A is known to value approval; and
 - (c) members B, C . . . N give him approval when he conforms.
 - (d) Therefore, A conforms.
2. Why does politician X advocate the policies he does?
 - (a) Proposition 3 (assumed):
 - (b) X needs campaign contributions, and
 - (c) group Y contributes heavily, contingent upon the policies he advocates.
 - (d) Therefore, X advocates certain policies.
3. Why does Johnny misbehave when company is in the house?
 - (a) Proposition 3 (assumed):
 - (b) Johnny is known to value his parents' attention;
 - (c) his parents attend to him when he misbehaves in front of company;
 - (d) Therefore, Johnny misbehaves around company.

The reasoning is not circular so long as our knowledge of (b) is not derived from our knowledge of (d). Homans was himself careful on this point. Yet despite his caution, Homans' critics accuse him of tautological reasoning (See Deutsch 1964).

If one must be so careful to avoid circular reasoning when using the reward-cost framework, and is likely to be accused of circularity despite such care, then there must be still other flaws of some sort hidden within reward-cost analysis. I suspect that the charge of tautology springs from two other problems, both of them more subtle and illusive in nature. The first involves ad hoc explanation—the difference between hindsight and prediction. The second relates to controversies about psychological reductionism.

The above examples of explanation based on rewards will help us see the issue. The logical sequence from (a) to (d) is not circular, but unfortunately, it does not follow as a reliable prediction either. While all politicians value campaign money, and while all might have their price, we do not know whether or not the “price is right” until after the fact of (d). While most people value social approval, we can seldom measure that value, along with the cost of conformity, well enough to predict that one will conform in exchange for approval. The same applies to the child in example 3, and in any other example one cares to mention. While we must have evidence of (b) independent of (d), (d) is almost always the best evidence we can obtain. And we have it first in the context of explanation rather than prediction. To predict exchange behavior from values poses profound measurement problems in the situational assessment of relevant values. However “explanation” is akin to hindsight, and this is far less demanding precisely because we can assess values from the consequent exchange behavior. If we do, however, the explanation is circular.

The Issue of Reductionism

In addition to the above logical and empirical grounds for suspecting explanations couched in terms of reward, there is another source of doubt relating to the common charge of reductionism. The examples listed above take as given an exchange process between two parties. They then employ the behavior of one party to explain the behavior of the other. But the actions are reversible: why do fellow group members approve of member A? (a) Proposition 3, (b) they are known to value conformity; (c) member A conforms; therefore (d) he is approved of. We now take as given (conformity) what was problematic in the above example.

Sociologists who are skeptical of the possibility or desirability of psychological reductionism would have reason to ask at least three questions at this point. First, when two actions are “explained,” each by the other, have we explained anything, or have we simply described a reciprocal social phenomenon? Second, by what right can we—or for what reason should we—separate a single social event (the exchange of conformity for approval) into two quasi-independent individual acts each to be explained? And third, if we view the social relation as explained when the contributing actions of each party have been “explained,” as above, what other features of the social relation are likely to be overlooked or left unexamined, due to our possibly premature sense of comprehension? This, I believe, is the point posed by Blau (1964), in warning us to be alert always to possible emergent phenomena in the study of social exchange.

The warning issued by Blau is worth heeding, if only for the practical reason that psychology has not yet attained behavioral omniscience.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE RELATIONS

In Part I, I suggested that four disciplines contribute to the exchange approach. However, our discussion so far has drawn largely upon work in psychology and sociology. There we have seen that when reinforcement psychology is applied to social situations, certain controversies emerge concerning issues of rationality, tautology, and reductionism.

Turning to the other two fields, we find an interesting and informative parallel. In economic anthropology, where economic theory encounters anthropological data, the same issues emerge and have been even more vigorously debated. For instance, Cohen (1967:104) points out that there are several modes of economic analysis, but the one most dominant, the one "which some economists now consider the basic method of their science—rests on the assumption—that men will seek to maximize their gains by obtaining the highest possible return for any given resources. But when this assumption is applied in many anthropological settings, Cohen observes (1967:106) that it

... becomes little or nothing more than a self-defeating tautology. Any action can be said to maximize someone's gain; if a man fails to obtain the highest possible price for his goods because of his impatience to quit the market, then he could be said to have maximized his gain, since the prospect of additional monetary gain is inadequate to outweigh some other advantage, such as attending a ceremony. Since he is maximizing his gain *whatever* he does, the concept can hardly have explanatory value. (This difficulty has been noted by Firth 1939:25–20.)

We need not repeat our earlier analysis of rationality and tautology. The important point is simply the parallel; between economics and anthropology, and between sociology and reinforcement psychology, the same issues emerge. We should be able to learn some lesson from these parallel debates.

Social Relations as Units of Analysis

Much of the controversy about rationality, tautology and reductionism is easily resolved. It only requires that we adopt explicitly the social exchange relation as the basic unit of analysis. This is dictated in part by the nature of the concept of reinforcement. The above discussion began with the observation that R and S^R , the reward and the operant behavior rewarded, are defined in terms of each other. They form a single conceptual and observational unit, the parts of which are only analytically separate. Since these two elements span both sides of the exchange relation (e.g. R =conforming behavior by a group member, and S^R =social approval from the group, provided in exchange for conformity), it seems essential that we take the social relation as an integral observational and conceptual unit. It is my contention that the above confusion concerning the issues of rationality, tautology, and reductionism springs directly from a failure to honor the integrity of the social relation as a unit of analysis.

To make this point as clear as possible, consider three different units of empirical observation: actions or decisions by individuals; transactions between individuals;

and exchange relations as series of transactions between the same individuals. On a philosophical plane, no one of these units can claim to be more real than another. The fact that persons can be pinched makes them no more substantial than social relations. That exchange relations are composed of actions gives actions no empirical primacy over relations. For example, the act of giving a gift takes place within a social relation, and such an act evolved as part of a social relation. Most operant acts evolve within such relations. As Firth (1967:4) has put it:

There is in social anthropology an understandable view that it is the social relation which is primary, which dictates the content and form of the transaction.

Firth quotes Sahlins (1965:139) on the same point:

A material transaction is usually a momentary episode in a continuous social relation. The social relation exerts governance: the flow of goods is constrained by, is part of, a status etiquette.

There is a long tradition in sociology and anthropology that inclines us to focus upon social relations, viewing individuals and actions as purely analytic elements within such relations. Rather than studying the actions of leading people, we study leader-follower role relations; rather than speaking of the power of persons, we speak of power-dependence relations; etc.

When the relation is explicitly adopted as the unit of analysis, the problem of tautology dissolves and the closely related problem of value measurement is significantly eased. Recall that the operant experiment outlined in Part IIA does not explain the pigeon's behavior; rather, it describes it as part of an organism-environment exchange. In so doing, it provides a basis for measuring the value of S^R to the pigeon. Similarly, if we describe the social exchange relation in which a group gives a person approval or status in return for his conformity (example 1 in our discussion of tautology above) this gives us by far the best handle we now have on the measurement of the value attached to approval (and to conformity). Of course, in taking the relation as the empirical and conceptual unit, we forego the right to explain the individual's behavior in terms of his own values. But what important insight do we lose when we give up this sort of "explanation?"

The Social Exchange Relation

Based on the above discussion of the primacy of the social relation, it is now clear that Homans should have included the behavior of Skinner along with that of the pigeon. Sociologists should find the pigeon's behavior interesting only when viewed within the integral exchange relation which in fact the pigeon shared with Professor Skinner. Just as the pigeon developed and repeated his pecking behavior under continuing reinforcement from Skinner, so Skinner developed and repeated his style of experimentation under continuing reinforcement in the form of patterned pigeon behavior. The Skinner Box provided the interaction medium through which a reciprocal social relation developed over time between the subject and the experimenter. That social relation, minimal as it might be in some respects, is a good example of what will be called an exchange relation, meaning simply that in studying

the relation we pay special attention to the reciprocal flow of valued behavior between the participants. Words such as *transaction* and *exchange* imply—quite correctly—that the flow is inherently reciprocal.²

Elsewhere I have recommended (Emerson 1972b) that we adopt the expression $Ax_i; B y_j$ as a notation for identifying exchange relations, where A and B are actors (either persons or corporate groups), and where x and y are “resources” introduced into exchange by A and B, respectively. We understand that x_i is operant behavior on A’s part, which means nothing more than the defining fact that its continued performance is contingent upon (at least occasionally) y_j from B, which is, simultaneously, the defining fact establishing y_j as a reinforcer or reward for A. While a symmetrical relation (in which y_j is also an operant reinforced by x_i) is not logically required, theory suggests that empirical instances of purely unilateral reward will be extremely rare and transitory in nature. (See Emerson 1972b on social power.)

The basic elements of the operant research format listed above should be reexamined now, for they point up some of the features of exchange relations taken as units of analysis. They entail a longitudinal series of transactions between two identified parties. The concept of reinforcement defined above requires a series of x and y transactions. This longitudinal feature of social exchange relations is important, as we shall see, specifically because most economic theory systematically ignores it!

Basic Concepts

I have postponed a review of basic concepts in order first to establish the relation as the unit of analysis. We may now examine basic concepts with the explicit understanding that most of them are employed as analytic tools within such exchange relations.

The vocabulary of social exchange theory today—reward, reinforcement, cost, value, utility, resource, comparison level, transaction, profit, outcome, etc—is an unconsolidated blend of ordinary speech and the technical vocabularies of research disciplines, notably psychology and economics. But despite the redundant array of words, the basic conceptions are few in number and their meaning is fairly stable. *Reinforcement*, as defined in Part I, is clearly the most simple and fundamental point of departure for most of the other concepts.

1. For example, a reward is virtually synonymous with a positive reinforcement, but with the added connotation of being socially administered.
2. Similarly, a resource is an ability, possession, or other attribute of an actor giving him the capacity to reward (or punish) another specified actor. Any ability

²The character of the contingency involved in the exchange of x and y differs in different modes of social interaction. On one extreme is the seemingly noncontingent “gift” of x, occurring as a separate act by A which has no easily apparent connection, either in time or in intention, to any specific reciprocating act by B, yet is performed within a social relation that is sustained by y_j , or normatively prescribes that y will occasionally occur. This is the pattern of social reciprocity discussed at length by Sahlins (1963, 1965), Gouldner (1960), and others. At the other extreme is overt negotiation, bargaining, or other joint-decision process that links x and y in a one-to-one pairing to form concrete transactions.

possessed by Person A is a resource only in relations with specific other persons who value it. Therefore, strictly speaking, resources are not possessions or attributes of individual actors, but rather they are attributes of the relationship between actors.

3. No concept is more important or more confusing than value. Yet, again, its basic meaning is fairly clear, and can be stated best in terms of reinforcement. The value of a unit of some stimulus (x or y) is the magnitude of reinforcement affected by that unit. We use the term *value* when dealing with reinforcement as a scalar variable.

I take this conception of value directly from Homans (1961). Economists have employed the concept of utility in referring to essentially the same notion: the subjective psychological value (i.e. amount of reinforcement) an individual derives from a good or service. Aside from the subjective status of utility, akin to some unit of satisfaction, as compared with the purely operational meaning assigned through the operant format, I know of no important difference between utility and value, as the latter is employed here.

The value of a unit of S^R has been further elaborated, resulting in four derivative conceptions worth mentioning: (a) value thresholds or standards, called *comparison levels* by Thibaut & Kelley; (b) the phenomenon of satiation-deprivation and the related economic concept of diminishing marginal utility; (c) preference orders and value hierarchies; and (d) the concept of cost; notably rewards foregone, or the notion of opportunity costs from economics; and aversive stimulation.

COMPARISON LEVELS (CL) The amount of S^R obtained per transaction over a series of transactions with a given environmental source becomes, over time, a neutral point on the scale of value for S^R . (For example, a child's weekly allowance from his parents for specified duties or general good behavior might be X dollars. The child, after value adaptation to that level, will act as though departures from X carry greater value, positive or negative, than X itself).

The adaptation level for valued stimuli has been recognized by different authors in different ways. Baron (1966) writes about a standard of social reinforcement formed as an internal norm or frame of reference, for responding to the behavior of others. Homans (1961) speaks of the expression of anger when S^R occurs below the expected level. One of the best known and most fully developed discussions was offered by Thibaut & Kelley (1959) under the name of *comparison levels* (CL). The concept plays a crucial role in their discussion of the evaluation of the dyad by its members.

"DIMINISHING MARGINAL UTILITY" The value of a unit of any type of reinforcer S_i^R is a decreasing function of the number of units recently received (or currently possessed). This principle, called satiation-deprivation in behavioral psychology, is an empirical generalization describing every rewarding stimulus as part of a feedback system, a cybernetic, or self-regulating system. The organism acts in such a way as to avoid both under- and overeating—or drinking, playing, or stimulation in general. Lurking behind this empirical principle is the interesting concept

of need—a concept that, in my opinion, we should develop rather than derogate. Meanwhile, the empirical generalization is extremely general. For example, social approval is considered by Homans and others to be an important generalized reinforcer. It has been shown to be more reinforcing to persons relatively deprived of it than to persons more satiated with approval (Erickson 1962), despite the fact that generalized reinforcers are thought to be less subject to satiation effects. In the experiment by Crosbie described above, it was shown that notebooks for students are subject to diminishing utility. Students “need” some, but not many.

COST If reward is the most common word, cost is the most troublesome word in the exchange vocabulary. It has two basic meanings:

1. Cost in the form of aversive stimuli encountered in a social transaction (e.g. painful or boring “work” performed)
2. “Cost” in the form of rewards foregone (e.g. time and effort that could have been spent otherwise, for some other valued return).

In economic theory the analysis of cost is fairly simple because in practice only meaning (2) is involved, through the concept of opportunity costs. But social exchange theorists, with their concern for psychology, add another troublesome layer of meaning.

Consider an ordinary example. A person hurries six blocks through a heavy rainstorm to meet a friend in a tavern. He enters wet and laughing, spends an hour or so and then goes home by bus to dinner. He could have taken the bus straight home, avoiding the rain and enjoying a book and a solitary glass of wine before dinner. Now, most exchange theorists in social psychology (Thibaut & Kelley, Homans, maybe Blau) write as though such an episode involved a choice between the two paths of action, which can be analyzed in some hedonistic calculus. Thus, $r_1 - c_1 - c_2 < 0$; where r_1 is the reward of a friend in a tavern, c_1 is the aversive cost of running in the rain and $c_2 = r_2$, the reward (foregone) of a book with wine.

We cannot repeat the discussion of rationality, tautology, and reductionism, but all of those issues rise again with the concept of cost. If we assume that social life proceeds as a flow of choices made by individuals (“shall I go straight home to my book or shall I meet my friend, or . . . or . . . ?”), then our theory is trapped into the above hedonistic calculus. If we assume instead that social life consists of longitudinal social relations forming, changing, and maintaining over time, then every feature of the above example can be seen in a different slant. Is a run in the rain “costly” when it is experienced within a long-term friendship?³ If a driving rain

³When a rat presses a lever, a pigeon pecks a disk or a man runs in the rain, is that “costly” effort or is it rewarding exercise? It has been shown that both rats and pigeons prefer to “work” for their food rather than eat free food (Neuringer 1969, Carter & Berkowitz 1970). Similarly puzzling behavior abounds at the human level. Cognitive dissonance theory has developed a line of research around a similar phenomenon, calling it effort justification. My point is simply this: we are profoundly ignorant about the nature of rewards and costs—and we shall remain so until value is studied as a dependent variable.

forces me to cancel a planned meeting, has much reward been foregone when the friendship continues through other meetings? Does the book and wine foregone add "cost" to the friendship, when the book and wine has its own long-term time and place?⁴

With the exchange relation as the unit of analysis, we see an actor engaged simultaneously in numerous exchange relations, each competing with some of the others for a commitment of resources. I suspect that a value hierarchy forms to regulate such commitment of resources.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

We already have, in economic theory, a fairly well-developed theory of exchange. Need anthropologists and sociologists formulate another one? Is social exchange theory simply borrowing concepts from economics—changing the words, perhaps, and applying them in different situations, but making no fundamental theoretical contributions?

While it is too early to offer definitive answers to these questions, I believe that a profound difference is beginning to emerge, clearly separating social from economic exchange theory. The difference, I will argue, stems from the conceptual units of analysis employed—longitudinal exchange relations versus ahistorical individual decisions. The difference can best be seen, however, in that most important invention of economics, the concept of the competitive market as a theoretical construct.

The "Market" as Simplifying Concept

As Firth (1967:5) has observed, "market" is used in three ways: the marketplaces where many people assemble to engage in transactions; the market for some specified good or service; and the market process

... implying the allocation of resources by references to impersonal criteria which disregard personal ties and social ends in favor of an immediate maximization principle of profitmaking. It is this concept which has been selected particularly for distinction as the criterion separating the types of economic systems studied by economists from those studied by anthropologists.

What Firth says for anthropology is true for sociology as well. Economic theory is heavily organized around a set of assumptions—the perfectly competitive market—which social exchange does not make. Those assumptions, as stated by Perroux (1950:190) require that

... goods and services exchanged are homogeneous and perfectly and indefinitely divisible; if they move without resistance or friction within one industry or from one industry to another, under the influence of an alteration in the level of their remuneration ...

⁴My concern here is that concepts such as opportunity cost or reward foregone, borrowed from a science of decisions (economics), might require major modification when imported into a science of longitudinal social relations (social exchange theory).

The major source of resistance or friction disallowed in this market construct are the very personal ties and social ends referenced by Firth as features of the exchange processes studied by anthropologists. Those personal ties are, of course, attributes of longitudinal exchange relations that can hardly be set aside or assumed away by social exchange theory, built as it is upon relations as the major conceptual unit.

The consequence of this difference is fairly profound. "Real" social structures that deviate substantially from the perfect market—and most structures do—constitute troublesome imperfections in economic analysis. When economic analysis attempts to incorporate those imperfections, economic theory loses much of its power and elegance. By contrast, social exchange theory seems to be forming specifically toward the analysis of such real but imperfect social structures—that is, social structures involving fairly long-term relations between people, in which power is neither diffuse nor equally distributed, as perfect competition implies (see Rothschild 1971 on the absence of power in neoclassical economic theory).

If economic and social exchange theory separate on the concept of *market*, we must address two questions. First, what does the concept do for economic theory? Second, what might social exchange theory incorporate in its place?

On the first question, the economist Coddington (1968:2) gives us a fine analysis:

In the theory of markets it has been possible to deal theoretically with the interaction of many economic actors by supposing that each one acts in an "environment" characterized by some representations of the aggregate behavior of all remaining actors . . . This approach to micro-economics has been particularly enlightening in circumstances involving a large number of economic units. It is well-known, however, that processes involving only a small number of economic units pose many theoretical problems which arise from the much stronger interdependence of the actors . . .

In the economic theory of competitive market process, theoretically manageable simplicity is achieved by conceiving a depersonalized other party called a market.

The analytic virtues achieved through the simplifying market assumption come at a high cost: the theory cannot deal with exchange between interdependent actors. Two immense fields of study are left for other theories to contend with: (1) the process of interactive exchange between interdependent actors (called an *exchange relation* here); who are located in (2) imperfect social structures among larger numbers of interdependent actors.

Exchange in Bilateral Monopoly

It is a paradox of economic theory that it fails to handle the most simple social structure, the dyad. This is a paradox only because the dyad is too important in economics to be ignored, and therefore has been given a lot of attention. It is treated as isolated exchange or bilateral monopoly.

When the monopolist faces a market involving many actors, he may regard the responses . . . as quite adequately represented by a demand curve . . . However, when the monopolist is faced with a monopolist, he is no longer concerned with an aggregate response to his decisions . . . the monopolist faces another decision maker. We have arrived at the old economic problem of the theory of bilateral monopoly or "isolated exchange." (Coddington 1968:4).

The problem when one actor faces another actor, rather than the statistical regularities of the market descriptably in demand curves, is that the exchange is indeterminate.

As Pen has pointed out, it is not the outcome which is indeterminate but the (economic) theory . . . The existence of indeterminacy seems to imply that we cannot achieve a proper understanding (of exchange among interdependent actors) without introducing further concepts into the theoretical framework. (Coddington 1968:11).

The condition of isolated exchange or bilateral monopoly under discussion here is, of course, the elementary exchange relation represented above as $Ax: By$. The indeterminacy referred to is the inability of economic theory to specify the exchange ratio x/y ; to predict who will get how much; to describe or explain the price that resource x will have in terms of y . As Coddington indicates, further concepts must be introduced into the theory. The additional concepts introduced by him are expectations about other's demands for a series of dates in the future, and the testing and revising of those expectations as time (and sequential actions) flow by.

Thus an economist attempting to deal with the social relation rather than the actor-market relation is forced to introduce the most essential feature of social exchange relations as conceived above: their developmental or longitudinal character. The expectations that Coddington conceives are similar to Thibaut & Kelley's "comparison level," although the two concepts are used in quite different ways.

Thus social exchange theory, focusing upon exchange relations, picks up precisely where traditional competitive economic theory seems to flounder. Is the problem of indeterminacy, encountered in the economics of bilateral monopoly and oligopoly, solvable within social exchange theory?

The Exchange Ratio x/y

Without doubt, the most central topic of research in social exchange theory to date has been the determination of the (economically indeterminate) exchange ratio x/y . It corresponds to price determination in economics.

MEEKER AND COOK ON "EXCHANGE RULES" AND "DISTRIBUTION RULES"
Before discussing determinants of x/y directly, we should recall that we are discussing a continuing series of transactions between the same parties. Unlike the ahistoric encounter in economic theory, when two persons interact over a period of time—or expect to—the exchange relation can take on what Blau might call "emergent," or simply developmental, attributes. For example, attitudes of interpersonal attraction will form between persons who repeatedly engage in mutually rewarding exchange (Byrne & Rhamey 1965, Lott & Lott 1969), adding a whole new dimension to the relationship—one that likely affects the bargaining process that results in x/y .

German to this point, Meeker (1971) and Cook (1975a) have separately developed an approach to decision making in social exchange relations that is especially worthy of note. In any situation in which actions will affect the distribution of rewards, a person may employ any one of a variety of exchange rules. An exchange rule or a distribution rule is a normative definition of the situation that forms among or is adopted by the participants in an exchange relation. It is among the emergent

attributes of exchange relations. For example, "rationality is an exchange rule that assigns to P the outcome that maximizes his total payoff." or again . . . "Group-gain is an exchange rule that assigns the maximum value to the sum of P's and O's total pay-offs." (This corresponds to Parsons's "collectivity orientation.") Other exchange rules discussed by Meeker are altruism, competition, reciprocity, and status consistency. The latter two have features in common with equity and distributive justice. Her list is not meant to be final or exhaustive.

In my opinion, through the general idea of an exchange rule, Meeker has made a real contribution to social exchange theory. Whether or not people are rational needs no longer hamper our discussions. Rather, rationality (and altruism and equity) are seen as orientations people sometimes take, depending upon the social relation they have with each other. She has brought the time-honored notion of the definition of the situation into the framework of exchange theory. In doing so, an important line of research is opened up: what are the factors that generate specific exchange rules as normative attributes of exchange relations?

The single most heavily researched topics in this field—equity and distributive justice—are the two that bear most directly upon x/y . The research is far too extensive to permit a review or a summary here. However, I think it well to assert that equity should be viewed, at least tentatively, as one exchange rule among others, as Cook has suggested.

SAHLINS ON THE "DIPLOMACY" OF TRADE One might object to the above discussion. Does not Meeker's exchange rule or Cook's distribution rule change the whole problem of economic determinacy? If an equity rule is operating between A and B, then A is not trying to maximize y as was assumed in the economic problem of bilateral monopoly.

True, we are dealing with a different game, but the difference is little more than the longitudinal aspect of exchange relations versus the cross-sectional game of a single market transaction. Short-run versus long-run gains separate the two.

Interesting work by Sahlins (1965) illuminates the point, deepening our understanding of distribution rules as developmental normative attributes of social exchange relations. His first point (1965:96) concerns ethnographic observations of x/y :

. . . most exchanges—whether as gift-giving, mutual aid, sale, barter, coercive presents or whatever—do not take place at uniform rates. There is a wide indeterminacy; similar goods move against each other at different ratios in different transactions. This indeterminacy of rates is *the* characteristic fact of primitive exchange.

Since most of these transactions take place in grossly imperfect markets, Sahlins observes that such variation might reflect the indeterminacy mentioned above—the indeterminant outcome of bargaining.

Unfortunately, however, bargaining is too marginal an exchange strategy among primitive peoples to bear the explanation of rate variations. It is unknown to most of them. Among societies that do practice it, haggling is typically a marginal transaction, restricted to inter-community deals between comparative strangers and considered disreputable in the inner social spheres where exchange is most intense.

Separating in-group exchange from external trade, Sahlins sees two clear but different patterns, describable as one of Cook's distribution rules. The rule operative between persons close in kinship and residential distance is called reciprocity in economic anthropology. It is in that sphere where exchange rates vary widely under the rule "to each according to need, from each according to capacity."

Meanwhile, in external trade, transactions under a distribution rule of equality are operative. Each transaction is one of a series between members of a trade friendship or partnership. Under such conditions (described more fully by Sahlins), each transaction must preserve the solidarity built by previous transactions and prepare the ground for future transactions. As a result, strictly economic relations develop an ethic and a diplomacy as part of a bargaining process. Thus,

The economic ratio is a diplomatic maneuver. "It requires a good deal of tact on the part of everyone concerned," as Radcliffe-Brown wrote of Andamanese interband exchange, "to avoid the unpleasantness that may arise if a man thinks that he has not received things as valuable as he has given . . ." (1948:42) The people must literally come to terms. The rate of exchange takes on functions of a peace treaty.

Not to say that intergroup exchange simply serves the "moral purpose" of making friends. But whatever the intent, and however utilitarian, it will not do to make enemies. —As it turns out, the safe and sane procedure is not just measure for measure—exactly balanced reciprocity. The most tactful strategy is economic *good* measure, a baker's dozen, of which there can be no complaints. The tendency becomes *over*-reciprocation (p. 104).

There emerges in longitudinal relations—if the parties enjoy a balance of power—equity and even a touch of altruism as exchange rules. For experimental studies on a similar point, see Berkowitz & Daniels (1964) and Jones (1969).

KUHN, PEN, AND EMERSON ON POWER Within economics proper, much discussion of indeterminacy in the x/y ratio concludes that it is a problem of power. Kuhn (1963) formulated a clear and very general conception of bargaining power in the A-B relation, showing further that his formulation is similar to my own theory of power-dependence relations, and similar also to other formulations in economics. Some time earlier, Pen (1959:112), writing on labor-management negotiation (which he sees as a problem in bilateral monopoly when labor is organized) was also moved to formulate the problem as a power process:

Now the sacrifice which B makes by retaining the good is obviously nothing more than the dependence of B on A. Therefore economic power is based on the extent to which the subject to be overcome is dependent on the "powerful" subject, and on the extent to which the "powerful" subject is independent of the subject to be overcome.

Bargaining power, like social power in general, is the potential to influence others' action (e.g. yield more y or accept less x per unit of y). But again, our concern is the series of transactions that comprise an ongoing social relation. Our hypothesis would be: If the relation is unbalanced in power to A's advantage, then x/y will decrease across continuing transactions until either power is balanced or x/y has decreased to the subsistence level for B. (By the subsistence level I mean the point

at which B departs from the relation, whether by migration, starvation, or loss of capacity to produce more y .) The rationale for this hypothesis includes two points: (a) changes in x/y after relative dependency (and power) in a predictable way; and (b) if A has the power to reduce x/y , but does not do so, he will derive less reward and/or more cost from the A-B relation than will B. Therefore, equity and distributive justice do *not* stand in opposition to power use or exploitation. As a result, self-righteous moral justifications for the use of social power are easily fashioned—the “white man’s burden” and similar rationales.

In an ethnographic context, Epstein (1967) gives us a fine analysis of the famous Jajmani village system of India, showing how it happens that x/y (the proportion of agricultural yield turned back to landowners by tenant farmers) evolved to a near-subsistence level for tenant farmers. For an experimental study of a similar process see Stolte & Emerson (1976).

STRATEGIC INTERACTION Finally, there is a large and rather scattered body of theory and research that deals in one way or another with the social interactive process relating to the x/y ratio. Where the above topics deal more with attributes of exchange relations—decision rules, power-dependence, etc—this work deals with internal interactive processes. We can list but a few: compliance-gaining techniques (Bandura 1969, Marwell & Schmitt 1965, Schmitt 1964, Schmitt & Marwell 1969), altercasting, (Weinstein 1965, 1966, 1969; Weinstein, Beckhouse, Blumstein & Stein 1968; Weinstein & Deutschberger 1963; Weinstein & Wiley 1969); ingratiation (Jones 1964, 1965; Jones, Gergen, Gumpert & Thibaut 1965; Jones, Gergen & Jones 1963, Davis 1965; Jones, Stires, Schaver & Harris 1968, Stires & Jones 1969); self-presentation and impression management (Goffman 1970; Gergen & Taylor 1969; Barth 1966).

Finally, a topic of especially high interest concerns the emergence of norms and contracts from the bargaining process. It entails the transition from strategic interaction to normatively regulated exchange. See Thibaut & Kelley (1959) on social norms, along with Thibaut & Faucheux (1965); Thibaut (1968); Thibaut & Gruder (1969); Murdock (1967); Murdock & Rosen (1970); and Michener, Griffith & Palmer (1971).

FROM MICRO TO MACRO EXCHANGE THEORY

Our discussion of exchange theory, dwelling as it has upon psychological and utility theory foundations, has emphasized microscopic social analysis. Indeed, the literature identified with Thibaut & Kelley, Homans, and Blau is almost exclusively the social psychological analysis of elementary social processes. However, despite this recent concentration at the micro level, social exchange theory has origins in, and is now returning to, the macro level of societal analysis. Ellis (1971), in his recent examination of the Hobbesian problem of order, refers to exchange theory as an approach on the same level with structural-functionalism and conflict theory. Similarly, Clark (1972) discusses functionalism and exchange theory as parallel—and complementary—approaches to macro level social analysis. Coleman’s work (1972, 1973) puts forth a macro-level form of exchange and power analysis, as does Burt

(1976). Cook (1975b) has begun an exchange approach to interorganizational research.

The gap between Homan's elementary processes and, say, Lenski's (1966) description of power and resource distribution in total societies cannot be bridged in a single span. Even so, the step-by-step extension of exchange theory to more macroscopic levels is clearly the most important line of continued theory construction.

"Elementary" Social Behavior

The transition from micro to macro theory must begin with an explicit recognition of features distinguishing the two levels. There appear to be three. First, Homans's "elementary" social behavior is subinstitutional in that it—the behavior—is seen as governed by the preferences of individuals as distinct from the prescriptions or mandates of enveloping social groups or social structural forms. (See Needham 1962 for an analysis of micro versus macro exchange of women in terms of preference versus prescription.) If an individual's actions in an exchange process are institutionally required, one might ask how reward/cost analysis can inform us about the process; yet, if valued resources are exchanged through prescribed behavior, something resembling reward is surely involved.

The above problem—exchange through prescribed behavior—might come down to the question of who is rewarded. This leads to the second feature of elementary exchange: the actor involved is usually treated as an autonomous individual, as distinct from corporate groups and from social persons (i.e. role occupants). When a woman is exchanged for goods in the institution of marriage, local lineages as corporate groups are the actors involved (Leach 1951). Those collective actors realize rewards and expend pooled resources through negotiations carried out by role-playing agents of the group. Thus, in some measure we already have concepts available to us (in role theory) to deal with prescribed exchange and collective actors.

It is the third feature of micro exchange theory that is most troublesome: it is dyadic. While the elementary social processes under study by Homans are not necessarily dyadic, the theory—the concepts and proposition introduced—move us to the analysis of two-party transactions. The same is true of Blau's (1964a) major contribution. While obviously concerned with the analysis of exchange among potentially large numbers of people, the basic concepts he employs, including those drawn from economics (e.g. indifference curves), incline one to reduce the social situation to a set of dyadic transactions. Economic theory offers aggregated analysis of such a set of socially separate two-party transactions.

Clearly, social exchange theory needs a set of concepts and principles that describe the linkage of exchange relations into larger social structures—structures that will do for social exchange theory something similar to what the competitive market does for economic exchange theory.

From 2- to N-Party Exchange: Corporate Groups and Exchange Networks

I have suggested elsewhere (Emerson 1969, 1972b) that two very different yet complementary distinctions help to extend systematic analysis from exchange in

dyads to larger social structures. One of these is productive exchange, useful in discussing group problem solving, the division of labor, (Emerson 1968) and corporate groups. The other is the concept of connections among exchange relations, leading to the analysis of exchange network structures.

GROUP PROCESS AS "PRODUCTIVE" EXCHANGE The economist Kuhn (1963) has made the claim that most organized social groups, both small and large—e.g. families, business corporations, committees, legislative bodies, etc—are based upon the single generic process that in economics is called production. To examine the character of this process Kuhn's own example is worth repeating:

Suppose that person A has bread as resource X, and person B has cheese as resource Y. Let both A and B value Z, where Z is a cheese sandwich. Under these conditions exchanges of x for y will occur in a typical exchange relation, Ax:By. After the exchange both A and B might fashion and eat their respective sandwiches. Call this familiar process simple exchange, to distinguish it from the following productive exchange. Instead of exchanging 1 x for 2 y and separately making sandwiches, A and B might jointly manufacture Z, sandwiches, and then divide up the product Z. Some "Z" can only be collectively produced. For example, in village India prior to the introduction of modern agricultural technology, grain could be produced most effectively by a total village community, including several classes of cultivators and several categories of artisans, all cooperating in an exchange system known as the *jagmani* system. The village operated as a corporate group, its members bound together in a special form of exchange.

That type of exchange can be called productive exchange. Unlike the direct transfer of valued items in simple exchange, here items of value are produced through a value-adding social process. In general, the separate resources of two or more persons, A, B, C, . . . N, are combined through a social process involving a division of labor. The result is a valued product that might be divisible (like grain) among all producers, or that might be converted through simple exchange to a divisible medium (money) and distributed among members by some distribution rule (see Cook, above.)

EXCHANGE NETWORKS The idea of productive exchange readily accommodates large numbers of actors, thereby freeing exchange theory from its dyadic format. However, productive exchange is uniquely addressed to resource distribution within corporate groups. Such groups can be properly viewed as "actors" in simple exchange processes. Examples are Leach's local lineage groups in the exchange of women, corporate villages in the land revenue system of the Mughal empire (Emerson 1976), etc. Therefore, it is essential in macro exchange theory that simple exchange also be analyzed beyond the dyad.

Thus we come to the notion of exchange networks involving three or more actors; structured exchange systems that are not to be confused with groups. Networks tie together both groups and individuals as actors. Some of the earliest social exchange theory dealt with such networks—Malinowski (1922) and others since on the "Kula ring"; Levi-Strauss (1969) and others on matrilineal cross-cousin marriage in "circles."

These two examples of network structure are worth describing. The Kula is an intertribal exchange of necklaces for armlets between communities inhabiting a ring of islands. If one party does not give to another what the other has given to him—like not returning a Christmas gift to its sender one year later; and if the item is not perishable or consumable, then it follows of necessity that: (a) the exchange system will be “closed” or cyclic; and (b) one item will flow always in one direction counter to the direction of another item. So it is with the Kula “ring.”

Similarly, in matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, a lineage cannot receive women from a lineage it gives women to. The origins or functions of this marriage rule have been hotly debated—in a debate of great relevance to our interest in micro versus macro theory (see Needham 1962; Homans & Schneider 1955, Ekeh 1974). But whatever its origin, some of its structural implications are clear: marriage networks will form circles, with women flowing in one direction. (As an exchange item, women cannot be “consumed” because of incest and exogamy rules.) But what other item flows against women? Need there be one?

Ekeh (1974) would like to believe that social exchange is not grossly utilitarian, and therefore that gifts (necklaces, women, etc) that flow in a circle need not—indeed, should not—have objects of material worth flowing the other way. In fact, he would prefer that nothing flow the other way, because if it does, the favored generalized exchange of the extended network might dissolve into the restricted exchange of two-party mutual reward, with a loss of group solidarity and other-directed morality.

In fact, however, such networks tend to be composed of linked two-way exchange relations. Objects of great material value are often exchanged for wives, both items flowing around the circle. The important studies in alliance theory do not depend upon nonutilitarian exchange, and they do involve the exchange of honor, status, and power (Leach 1951).

With such networks as the above to illustrate the idea, the general topic of network forms and structures stands open as a most fruitful line of research.⁵ A lot of research on exchange networks is now going on. In the laboratory Stolte & Emerson (1976) have shown power to be a function of position in network structures

⁵Far more common than the rings and cycles described above are centralized tree structures. For example, Sahlins (1963) describes the typical “big man” pattern in anthropology as a network for the pooling and redistribution of resources. Barth’s (1959a) study of political leadership in Swat could be analyzed as such a structure.

Sahlins’s notion can be viewed as a centrally organized system of what ethologists study under the label of “reciprocal altruism” in lower animal species. A gives help to B when B is in need, and at cost to A. If and when A needs help and C, D . . . N is around, one will provide it—again, with no assurance of return. However, the genetic line common to A through N is given a survival advantage through such “reciprocal altruism.”

In Sahlins’s discussion, reciprocity as a human exchange system functions the same way, but it occurs only among persons with close kinship distance. It might be a backup or regulated by kin group authority structures. When the group is larger, a centrally managed system of taxation and relief may emerge, as outlined in Sahlins’s pooling and redistributing network structure.

of various shapes. Burt (1976) gives us mathematical models of power and position in community structure viewed as an exchange network. He utilizes data provided by Lauman & Pappi (1976). Emerson (1972a) has suggested directions that substantive exchange network theory can take in examining such topics as social class, stratification, and division of labor.

Waiting for such substantive theory to catch up is a body of available mathematics in the form of graph theory and network theory.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

"Exchange theory" is not to be taken as a theory. Rather, it is a frame of reference that takes the movement of valued things (resources) through social process as its focus. As I see it, its scope is defined by an assumption: that a resource will continue to flow only if there is a valued return contingent upon it. Psychologists call this contingent return *reinforcement*—economists simply call this reciprocally contingent flow *exchange*.

In reviewing the recent literature on social exchange one finds conceptual confusion and debate concerning issues of tautology, rationality in social behavior, and reductionism in the strategy of explanation. This confusion has, I believe, seriously retarded empirical research. The confusion stems, again in my opinion, from the use in sociology of concepts born in the analysis of individual actions and decisions. I recommend that longitudinal social relations—exchange relations in this case—be consciously employed as the unit of analysis.

With such a unit it is then possible to deal developmentally with structures of continuing interaction between parties—corporate groups and their role-occupying members; and networks involving many actors, both corporate groups and individuals. It is precisely social structures of this sort that violate the assumptions of neoclassical economics (e.g. "vertical organization" and oligopoly in the oil industry). Thus, I like to think of social exchange theory as developing the conceptual tools needed (longitudinal exchange relations and network structures) to deal with exactly those topics that economics theory has trouble with: market imperfections.

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